

A Lesson from the Land of Eagles

By Lisa Morgan and Jane Taunton

"He went out shouting, 'I'm not an English teacher. I've not been to London or America.'"

"I come here to your classroom to take and give."

(See Footnote 1 below) The above quotations are taken from an assignment entitled "A Nightmare Consultation," which we gave a group of Albanian advisory teachers during one of their quarterly training seminars. In this article we give reasons for asking them to write about a nightmare and show how the results unexpectedly provided us with insights and also suggested directions for further training.

Background

Since Albania emerged in the early 1990s from isolation, huge problems in primary and secondary education have become apparent, without insufficient resources to solve them. Classrooms are often at an advanced stage of decay; qualified teachers are in short supply, especially in English; systematic teacher training is lacking; transmission of knowledge and rote learning are still the order of the day; teaching aids are usually limited to blackboard and textbooks; textbooks are often in short supply and are of limited value.

This gloomy picture lightens somewhat if we look at a development which has taken place, in theory across the curriculum but, in practice, only English language teaching has the support of outside agencies.

In 1993 a network of "Formatore" (advisors/advisory teachers) was established by the teachers themselves to provide low-cost in-service training for their peers. These advisors support teachers in their districts through local seminars and individual counselling. To do this they are given a reduced teaching load.

However, an advisory network, which is a good idea in principle, is subject to the constraints of its impoverished setting:

- The advisors themselves have had little or no training apart from a degree in their subject.
- Low-paid teachers are often not inclined to put in extra effort.
- Other experienced teachers resent having a peer "meddling" in their teaching.
- Advisors are isolated from each other. Although Albania is a small country, poor roads and few telephones make communication difficult.
- In the English teaching field many qualified teachers have left the profession to take better-paying jobs. Some districts now have a majority of teachers without a degree in English.

Fortunately, with financial support from several outside agencies, principally the British Council and the United States Information Agency (USIA/USIS), we have been able to provide both short initial training (10 days) and ongoing training seminars (45 times a year) for English teaching advisors.

Because of time and cost restrictions, help for individual teachers is confined to Tirana and its immediate surroundings. During the initial training in the first year, seminars were devoted mainly to the development of the advisors' own teaching skills and to familiarising them with techniques and activities associated with the communicative approach.

During the second year we held three seminars focusing on the process of counselling individual teachers including observation, consultation, and remediation (Bowers 1987), and clarifying the difference between the roles of advisor and inspector.

For the seminars on observation and remediation we had ample guidance from literature in the field, but when we approached the difficult but vital stage of consultation, we found a very limited receptivity. One response to this dilemma was "A Nightmare Consultation."

"A Nightmare Consultation"

After the observation stage, we asked the advisors to consider the following questions which were intended to set the stage for consultation: "What kind of follow-up to your observation was there?" "When did you meet with the teacher after observation and how did it go?"

This was a flop. The answers we received were uninformative, suggesting that the lessons observed had all been successful, and indicating that there was little need for assistance from an advisor. With hindsight, the failure of this activity was not surprising. One of the vestiges of the past in Albania is over-emphasis of the positive to the exclusion of open recognition of problems which need to be solved. Another problem from the past—a reluctance to commit oneself in writing—posed a serious problem to reporting on actual consultation.

We thus had to reconsider how we were going to encourage record keeping which acknowledged problems and sought solutions. We therefore decided, for the next seminar, to ask advisors to write an account of an imaginary worst-scenario consultation, i.e., a nightmare. We hoped that such an account might help throw off inhibitions in their writing.

In the seminar, as a preliminary to the writing task, we elicited from the advisors what they were likely to do in a follow-up session with a teacher they had observed. We gave a few examples (suggesting, describing, active listening, disagreeing), which stimulated responses such as agreeing, encouraging, asking, clarifying, recording, chatting, convincing. Then the degree of threat that these actions were likely to pose to the teacher was also discussed.

We next gave the following series of headings to use as a framework for writing up "A Nightmare Consultation":

- Date of consultation
- Place
- Length
- Teacher's name and school (imaginary)
- Objectives of lesson
- Main focus of the consultation
- Consultation techniques used. How did the teacher respond to you?
- Are you going to give up on this teacher?
- If not, what will your approach be next time? If you continue, what kind of remedial work will you do with this teacher?

(This last question was to help prepare the ground for the final stage of the counselling process, remediation.)

A time limit was set, writers were invited to remain anonymous, and for half an hour all the advisors were engaged in their individual nightmares. Then they pinned up their finished accounts for others to read.

Outcome

When we subsequently asked the advisors why they thought we had asked them to write about a "nightmare" consultation, many points surfaced which we had not anticipated but which added to the value of this activity. Reasons given were,

- To share problems
- To release feelings
- To deal with the reality of work
- To show that life is not a bed of roses
- To develop writing skills
- It was a kind of diary.

It was obvious from some of these responses (which often met with general agreement) that an imaginary account was very close to reality. To illustrate this we have selected the following quotations, followed by our interpretations:

1. "She was older than I so she was a bit jealous."

(Advisor recognising that s/he does not have the approval of all teachers.)

2. "She wouldn't listen. she kept her own way, pretending she was a good teacher (she had been teaching for 20 years)-stubborn, allowed no suggestions whatsoever."

(Advisors acknowledging resistance to change by some teachers.)

3. "Your job is just to see. You have just come to see."

(Advisor recognising that his/her work is seen as nebulous and inconsequential by some teachers.)

4. "I want to learn something from you." *(advisor to teacher)*
"I come here to your classroom to take and give." *(advisor to teacher)*
(Advisors seeing selves as equal, not superior.)

5. ".he went out shouting, 'I'm not an English teacher. I've not been to London or America.'"
"I don't know why. I am unqualified. I am trying, you see."
(Advisors acknowledging the frustration felt by teachers without proper training.)

6. "I decided to go to him again on a good spring day." "It was December, the coldest month of winter." "It was a cold day. She was a new teacher."
(Advisors recognising factors which influence performance.)

7. "I decided to return with Carl Rogers' Sharing and Caring." *(Advisor appreciating the role played by psychology in counselling.)*

8. "I don't know now but I'll try to find the best way to be convincing and make her consider me a friend." "Anyway, I thought it was partly my fault, perhaps I didn't find a way to deal with her." "I had the impression I, too, was being influenced by her bad humour and becoming aggressive."
(Advisors finding development of counselling skills an uncomfortable process.)

9. "Perhaps the best remedial work possible would be no more observation for a time. Try to elicit her opinions in seminars, and ask her to come to one of my classes or of another experienced, qualified teacher." "Another time I'm going to organise one or more open classes for him with his pupils and try to prove how successful planned lessons are."
(Advisors already have some ideas for remedial work.)

10. "I suggested to her that the teacher's bad humour must not influence her teaching and must not be transmitted to her students. The students need to be accepted as they are, with good and bad points; they ought to be understood and trusted."
(Advisor understanding that attitude can affect negatively the relationship between teacher and students.)

11. "She did only reading and translation." *(Adviser)* "I kept good discipline. The children were quiet." *(Teacher)*
(Advisors recognising the need for opportunities for pupils to use the language in class.)

Conclusion

In summary, it can be seen that our assignment "A Nightmare Consultation" was a success in that it gave us, the trainers of trainers, an enlarged picture of the advisors' professional lives and a cumulative account of their various problems and needs. What is clear is that they do not dwell

on the physical constraints which are beyond their control, i.e., poor environment, lack of books. They also perceive a responsibility for providing professional support which is within their means. We believe that recognising and confronting the problems are the first steps to solving them. "A Nightmare Consultation," which started out as a simple writing activity, was a stimulus to this and has provided us with guidance for further training.

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Footnote 1

Albanians call their country Shqiperia, the Land of Eagles.